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THEOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY

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# The Theological Work of the University Scholar

JOSEPH C. HOUGH, JR.

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One in a series of essays  
prepared for the University Divinity School Project  
sponsored by the Lilly Endowment Inc.

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# Introduction

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In the 1980s a creative group of North American theological educators opened a new chapter in a story that has stretched over nearly 200 years. They sought fresh answers to a question that had confronted their predecessors since the early 19th century: “What is the distinctive work of the theological school?” In the course of their work during the last decade, these educators gradually developed an extensive and often suggestive body of writings about the aims and purposes of theological education. Some of the most gifted leaders in this enterprise were faculty members at university divinity schools.

Interestingly, however, this literature included little about the particular vocation of the university-related theological school. Indeed, no generation of 20th-century educators has attempted to address the topic. Now, thanks to the support of the Lilly Endowment for the work of the University Divinity School Project, a new set of resources will be available to university leaders and divinity school faculty as they contemplate the future of this important institution in the 21st century.

The publications of the project will offer several perspectives on this subject. Conrad Cherry has written the first comprehensive account of the university divinity school and its history over the last 100 years. In his new work, *Hurrying Toward Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools and American Protestantism*, Cherry explains how the pressures of American history in the 20th century have eroded older, often unstated, but nevertheless powerful definitions of the divinity schools’ vocation in both the universities and the larger society. The character and influence of these schools, which could once be taken for granted, appear today to belong to a rapidly receding past.

The final report of the project, *Theology in the University: A Study of University-Related Divinity Schools*, is another source of information about these schools. In it, the director of the project, James L. Waits, outlines the challenges facing the divinity school in the university today and urges a new and participatory citizenship on the

part of faculty, administrators, and students. An analysis of some of the more persistent issues facing these institutions (issues such as faculty development, administrative leadership, student admissions, financial and other resources) is also undertaken. The challenges outlined in this study are both difficult and energizing for the future viability of theology in the university.

Another resource is this series of essays. Each of these essays poses thoughtful questions and intriguing arguments that should figure in the coming conversations about the future of the university divinity schools. They represent important claims about the mission and vocation of these institutions. Here are eight voices that deserve to be heard in the days ahead:

**The Divinity School in the University:**

**A Distinctive Institution**

Martin E. Marty

**University Divinity Schools: Their Advantages**

James M. Gustafson

**The Evangelical Task in the Modern University**

George M. Marsden

**The Theological Work of the University Scholar**

Joseph C. Hough, Jr.

**Toward the Integrated Study of Religion in the University**

Ronald F. Thiemann

**The Moral Purpose of the University**

James T. Laney

**Institutional Revitalization:**

**Leadership, Process, and Providence**

Larry Jones

**A Failure of Leadership?**

**Globalization and the University Divinity School**

Judith A. Berling

These essays were edited by Robert W. Lynn, former Senior Vice President of the Lilly Endowment, and James L. Waits, Executive Director of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. They are produced as part of the University Divinity School Project, initiated by the Lilly Endowment in 1988.

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His publications include works on theological education, the church and ministry, and social ethics, including *Theology and the University* (with David Griffin, editor, 1991) and *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (with John Cobb, 1985).

For 10 years he chaired the advisory committee of the Basic Issues Research Program of The Association of Theological Schools. He also chaired the Basic Issues Seminar for National Church Leaders and the advisory panel for the Center for the Study of Theological Education. He is currently chair of a two-year study of graduate education in theology and religion sponsored by the Center for the Study of Theological Education. At Vanderbilt University he chaired the University Committee on the Senior Scholar and the Special Ad Hoc Committee on Cross-Professional Ethics.

He is a member of the Society of Christian Ethics, the Society for Values in Higher Education, and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Religion.

# The Theological Work of the University Scholar

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JOSEPH C. HOUGH, JR.

**B**eginning with the rise of the modern university in the late 18th century, the proper location for a faculty of theology has been the subject of a continuing debate. In this essay I propose to offer a brief historical rehearsal of the changing status of theological faculties in the university with a particular focus on the factors leading to the development of departments of religion and divinity schools in the universities of the United States. I conclude by noting arguments in support of the university divinity schools and the teaching of theology in the modern American university.

Professors of theology have been citizens of the university since the rise of the great medieval institutions of higher learning.<sup>1</sup> The universities themselves were understood theologically as one of the great "pillars" of medieval society, and university instruction was always seen to be in the service of Christian piety. In large measure, then, the vocation of the teacher in the university was hardly distinguishable from the vocation of ministry in general. The professors, like the university, had a distinctive responsibility for learning, but they were all clerics and it was clear that as teachers or masters in the university their primary loyalty was to the church. Theology was the highest pinnacle of university study, and even those who studied for the other learned professions were schooled in theology as well.

The Reformation did little to challenge this essential idea of the university. In fact, at Geneva, Calvin included university teachers within the orders of the ministry, and the university was clearly an instrument for fashioning the social order in the image of Christ.<sup>2</sup> While it is true that Protestants at first cooperated with the humanists in a struggle to displace Catholic domination of the universities, the cooperation was transitory and enmity soon appeared as confessional interests increasingly dominated the thinking of the Protes-

tant reformers regarding the university. Erasmus declared that “knowledge perished wherever Lutheranism became dominant,” and by the end of the 16th century, Protestantism had swept the humanists out of Protestant-dominated universities.<sup>3</sup>

Not until the early end of the 17th century with the establishment of the University of Halle in Germany was the place of theology in the university seriously challenged. Under the leadership of Thomasius Wolff, philosophy replaced theology at the center of the university. He championed the pursuit of truth based on reason alone. Morality and law, Wolff argued, were no longer to be grounded theologically but would be based on rational knowledge of the human person and society. Moreover, rational knowledge was to be advanced by research. Knowledge was no longer seen to be the wisdom of the past that was simply to be transmitted to students, nor was it the function of the university to preserve and secure ancient truths against challenge. The assumption on which the new university instruction was to be based was that truth was to be *discovered*.<sup>4</sup> The university professor was to be free of any regulations by state or church that would limit research leading to discovery, and he also would, of necessity, be free to encourage students to follow a similar path.

Theology, then, was effectively dethroned and cast out of the universities, at least for a little while. I say “for a little while” because after the death of Frederick the Great in 1786, his successor, Frederick William II, launched a campaign to restore the primacy of confessional theology and to silence criticism of orthodox confessional tenets. Obviously, this was a serious threat to the freedom of university faculties to do research.

In this context, Immanuel Kant wrote the treatise, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, and addressed it to Prince Frederick William.<sup>5</sup> Kant was essentially responding to ecclesiastical criticisms of his own work and the limitations on the freedom of the faculty of philosophy.

In the development of his argument, Kant reasoned that because the ruler should be interested in the health of the citizens, he should try to prevent the spread of disease due to faulty medical practices. It was, therefore, in the ruler’s interest to have the medical faculty in

the university in order to insure the highest standards of training for doctors. Similar arguments were advanced in support of law to combat radicalism and to ensure legal rationality. His argument specifically for a faculty of theology in the university rested on the ruler's interest in preventing heresy, fanaticism, and religious anarchy—all of which could be disruptive of public order.

Kant argued that the only way the ruler could insure the highest standards in the professional faculties was to place them in the university, a context in which their teaching and writing would be subject to the rational criticisms of the philosophy faculty. And, of course, the philosophy faculty could not do its work of rational criticism in service of the interests of the state unless it was free to be critical of the teachings of any of the professional faculties. It is in the interest of the government, said Kant, to secure the best advice that it can find on matters affecting the life of the body politic. That will be possible only if there is a community of theological scholars dedicated to the highest ideals of critical thinking. In other words, the university cannot fulfill its proper end, the promotion of the good of the state, unless it is free to do its work. Kant did not deny the right of the ruler to limit the scope of the teaching of the professions. He simply insisted that the limitations should be imposed on the basis of rational criticism if the aim of the ruler was to preserve order.

Here the argument for a theological faculty in the university is made on the grounds that to have the theological faculty in the university serves the ends of the university. The university cannot perform its service to the good of the society and the state unless it has within it a theological faculty. Otherwise, an important problem of leadership, crucial to the order and the good of the state, would not be properly addressed.

It is important to note that Kant does not argue, as did Schleiermacher a few years later that a university-based theology should be a “scientific” theology. While there is no doubt that Kant himself thought that religion based on reason was superior to confessional religion, he acknowledged the right of the biblical faculty to teach the tenets of the Bible in a confessional manner.

What Kant was contesting was the right of the theological faculty to silence the critical arguments of the philosophical faculty by fiat rather than by rational argument. That, he contended, not only prevented the philosophy faculty from doing its proper work, it also insured that the quality of confessional theology would remain at a very low level.

Just after the turn of the century, the discussion of the place of the theological faculty in the university was focused on the founding of the new university in Berlin. The issue here was once again the issue first joined at Halle. Is there a place in a modern scientific university for the study of theology at all? The related argument over just what should be taught in a university faculty of theology was addressed as well. The chief protagonists in the debate over the status of theology in the university were Johann G. Fichte and Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Fichte did not think that theology as such belonged in the new university because it was not a positive science, that is it had no identifiably unified subject matter of its own. He argued that historical theology and philological studies in theology could easily be assigned to other faculty. Because dogmatics could not yield scientific knowledge, it had no place in a scientific university at all.<sup>6</sup>

Schleiermacher offered the counter argument that theology was in fact a positive science because it represented a “body of scientific elements which [had] a connectedness of their own.” This connectedness resided first in the essential relation of all the elements of theological studies to a determinate faith, a mode of God-consciousness. Schleiermacher went on to say that the sciences cannot merely be speculative; they must be practical. Therefore, theology is a science to the degree that it provides guidance for the church in the broadest sense possible. There is yet one more caveat. Theological studies are not for everyone. The unity of theological studies finally lies in the fact that each of the elements is necessary for the preparation of those who will lead the church.<sup>7</sup> In other words, theological science is in complete harmony with the purpose of the university—namely to produce *educated leadership* for one of the

major professions essential to the life of the state. Thus Schleiermacher indirectly answered Fichte by changing the terms of the discussion.<sup>8</sup> The “scientific” character of theological studies as a whole resides in their reference to the possibility of advancing a particular kind of knowledge—namely, knowledge concerning the character of God-consciousness represented in Christian faith. Thus, not only do theological studies belong in the new scientific university, dogmatic theology itself belongs in historical theology because knowledge of the contemporary state of Christian thinking about God (i.e., dogmatics) is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the historical manifestation of Christian faith right through to the present. The scientific character of theological studies as a whole is also secured by the test of practicality. It is knowledge of faith that is directed toward the practical manifestation of that God-consciousness in the institutional life of the church.

The disagreement at Berlin involved two separate but related issues. First, there was the question of whether theological studies, necessary for the preparation of leaders of the church, would be included in the university at all. In other words, the future of the program in theological studies, including all matters of science and those matters affecting the life and governance of the church, was at stake. Should these studies be carried on in the new university? Second, there was the question of the appropriateness of including dogmatic theology as such in university theological studies. Could any dogmatic studies be scientific? Schleiermacher had to answer both at once. If studies of determinate faiths did not include dogmatics, Fichte could win the argument. Theological studies could be dispersed among other related sciences. But this would mean that in the new university, no specific attention would be paid to the matters affecting the guidance and governance of the church. Thus, even if there were room for historical, philosophical, and philological studies focused on Christianity, theological studies as a coherent subject matter would have no practical base in the university.

In the immediate setting of the controversy, Schleiermacher was successful,<sup>9</sup> but two problems were created in his argument that are

at the center of the discussion of theology in the university today. First, though his argument in the *Brief Outline* focused specifically on the needs of leadership for the church, his argument was close to the appeal of Kant. As we have seen, Kant argued that it was in the interest of the state to insist on the presence in the university of the faculties of medicine, law, and theology so that there could be some control over the quality and even the content of training for the leaders of key social institutions. Schleiermacher, too, made the argument for a faculty of theology in the university on the basis of the university's interest in providing cultured leaders for the major institutions of the state. That political argument, however, tended to subordinate the more substantive argument for the scientific nature of theological studies as a unified approach to knowledge of a certain kind.<sup>10</sup> A second problem was Schleiermacher's argument in his essay on the university that professors responsible for theological studies must have standing in another of the scientific faculties in the university in order to be considered for teaching theological subjects. This argument, by implication, conceded much that had been won. Though the *place* of theological *studies* in the university had been secured, the *status* of theological *faculty* was derivative, and by implication, this cast doubt on the status of theology as a scientific subject appropriate for university study.

At the turn of the 19th century, the set of issues concerning the place of theology in the university, which came into focus during the founding of the University of Berlin, began to bedevil America's private colleges and universities as well. Even as early as the 17th century, there had been some uneasiness at Harvard University about whether or not a theology closely related to the churches could really be open to objective research.<sup>11</sup> It was not until a little after the mid-point of the 19th century that nearly all American theological faculties were being affected specifically by German theology and scholarship.<sup>12</sup>

As more and more theological students returned from Germany to teach in American colleges, universities, and theological seminaries, the teaching of religion in the colleges and universities changed

radically. At Harvard, especially, fascination with “scientific” theology had given a historical cast to all theological studies by the end of the 19th century. Though specific reference to “scientific” theology faded along the way, the dominance of the historical method made it difficult to sustain strong interest in and support for systematic theology, the descendent of the old dogmatics. Even though President Eliot at Harvard gave a ringing endorsement to theological studies in the university in 1879, it was clearly theological studies in the historical mode that he had in mind.<sup>13</sup> This was true not only at schools like Harvard, but also in the small denominationally related colleges as well.<sup>14</sup>

The growing hegemony of scientific theological studies exacerbated the doctrinal disputes that early in the 19th century had created turmoil in the colleges where theology was taught. That turmoil ultimately led in 1808 to the establishment of the first theological seminary in the United States that was separate from a university, Andover Theological Seminary, an event which set in motion what George Williams has called a “disastrous pattern in American higher education . . . the separation of theological studies and other studies for the professions from the university.”<sup>15</sup> Harvard responded by establishing the first university divinity school in America in 1811. This was followed by Princeton in 1812 and Yale in 1822. Following Andover, other denominational groups moved to establish freestanding theological seminaries as well.

This development cannot be understood merely as the fragmentation of theological education as a result of theological differences. It was at least partially a reflection of the concerns about the inadequacy of theological education mentioned earlier. Moreover, as Bainton has argued, the formation of divinity schools and seminaries must also be seen as part of the dawn of professional schools in general.<sup>16</sup> Whether one sees the separation of the seminaries from the universities in the apocalyptic terms of Williams or in the more measured view of Bainton, the establishment of church-related theological seminaries outside the university reflected the legitimate concern of church leaders about the capacity of the university to give due attention specifically to those matters which, in Schleiermacher’s

terms, affected the life and governance of the churches. If from their perspective, the scholarship of the university was not only out of touch with the practical needs of the churches, but the scholars were downright disdainful of the orthodox beliefs and practice, it was quite evident that there was a problem for the churches with locating the educational programs for young ministers in the universities. Thus, by the end of the first half of the 19th century, a distinctly American pattern had been set. Theological education was to take place in denominational seminaries apart from the universities. But theological education of a very similar sort was also to take place in university divinity schools.

**A**nother peculiarly American phenomenon was the state university in which the teaching of theology was, in effect, prohibited. Though early state universities were often controlled informally by specific denominational groups, Jefferson's proposals for William and Mary in the late 18th century deliberately excluded the teaching of theology in the university. When the University of Virginia opened in 1818, it had no theological faculty, nor was there any provision for religious activities on campus. All religious studies were relegated to "Schools on the Confines," that is, outside the curriculum and off the campus of the university.<sup>17</sup> That pattern continued for a time in state-supported institutions essentially for many of the same reasons.

Henry Tappan's proposal for the University of Michigan is a good example. In Tappan's proposal for a "true" university, there was no suggestion of a faculty of theology. Given his professed admiration for the German universities, Tappan was aware that this would seem odd. He proceeded to give an explanation for this puzzling omission:

It will be remarked that we have omitted a Faculty of Theology in the constitution of this University. As each denomination of Christians has its peculiar Theological views and interests, it would be impossible to unite them harmoniously in one faculty. It is most expedient, therefore,

to leave this branch to the Theological institutions already established by the several denominations. But still a connection of an unobjectionable character might be formed between Theological institutes, especially those existing in this city and the University.<sup>18</sup>

He suggested the possibility of cross-registration of students and inter-institutional accreditation of work toward degrees as means for creating a cooperative relationship between the state university and private sectarian theological schools.

Tappan's exclusion of theological study from the university, then, was surely *not* based on any question about its academic respectability. Nor was his objection to the study of theology in the university due to any kind of bias against religion as such. He was an ordained minister committed to the maintenance of a strong Christian ethos in the university. He was even committed to the support of compulsory religious practices for the students.<sup>19</sup>

His opposition to the study of theology in the university like Jefferson's was based on his observations and his direct experience of the contentiousness and competitiveness among the various denominations. He could see no end to that problem and concluded that in a community of religious pluralism, under the constitutional provisions for separation of church and state, it was simply impossible to have theological instruction in public institutions.<sup>20</sup>

The University of Michigan was the most important of the state universities in the Midwest. Its charter was the basic document used in the establishment of the University of Minnesota, and it was also influential in the deliberations leading to the founding of the University of Wisconsin.<sup>21</sup> Tappan was also a major influence on Andrew White, a professor of history at the University of Michigan who was later to become the founding president of Cornell, the first major land-grant university in the United States.<sup>22</sup>

Tappan's thinking about the place of theology in the university, therefore, continued the Jeffersonian model and was influential in setting the early pattern followed by most state universities established in the 19th century.

Another interesting American phenomenon was the development of departments of religious studies that were separate, at least organizationally, from the divinity schools. By 1890, Yale had an official chair of English Bible in the university faculty, and William Rainey Harper was the first incumbent. He believed that the proper approach to the study of the Bible was to develop methods of inquiry that were in strictest accord with the latest critical scientific scholarship. Harper took his ideas with him to Chicago where he continued his emphasis on the highest scholarly standards for the study of the Bible.

In 1893 Harper sent one of his students, J. L. Willett, to the University of Michigan to teach English Bible. Soon thereafter, Michigan became the first state university to establish a chair in the English study of the Bible. Other state institutions followed suit, including Jefferson's Virginia, and Georgia, Texas, Missouri, and Illinois. Usually instruction in the Bible began where both Jefferson and Tappan had defined its place—at the periphery of the campus—often as a project of a pastor in the “university church.” Universities gradually incorporated these courses into their curricula, first granting academic credit for courses and then granting faculty status to the instructors.<sup>23</sup> A few years later, under the leadership of Charles Kent of Yale, the National Council on Religion moved to establish privately funded “schools of religion,” near state universities in which religious subjects would be taught in a manner consonant with the highest standards for scientific scholarship. Though few of these schools survived the Second World War, what they portended was the development of state university departments of religion.<sup>24</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century then, the course of study that in Berlin had been understood as the study of theology was institutionalized in several more-or-less distinct settings in the United States. There were theological seminaries, university divinity schools, and departments of religion, both graduate and undergraduate, in private and state universities.

In the major private universities with divinity schools there was little to distinguish between the research methodology or content of teaching of departments of religion and the historical disciplines in

the divinity schools, and systematic theology was often hardly distinguishable from philosophy of religion.<sup>25</sup> Even the faculties of church history, Bible, and theology were often interchangeable, particularly in graduate departments of religion

By the 1930s, however, the validity of systematic theology as an academic discipline in the modern university was being openly questioned. This time the problem was not only sectarian strife, but the perceived lack of academic integrity of theological studies. In a series of lectures at Yale denouncing the current state of the university, Robert Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, declared that theology as a subject area had compromised itself to such an extent that it could no longer provide the central organizing principle of the university.<sup>26</sup> At about the same time, President Conant at Harvard was openly expressing his opinion that theology as such was a divisive rather than a unifying principle in the university.<sup>27</sup>

William Adams Brown of Union Theological Seminary fought a vigorous rear-guard action, arguing against Hutchins for the central place for the study of a more scientific theology in the university. He actually won a concession from Hutchins that there was a place in the university for a critical theology, but Hutchins never retracted his judgment that theology was no longer capable of serving as a unifying force in the university.<sup>28</sup>

As late as 1954 at Harvard, George H. Williams again pleaded the case for the centrality of theology in the university. The withdrawal of theology from the university, Williams argued, would seriously weaken the constitution of the university and place in jeopardy its connection with its past. He argued that the time was ripe for the revival of interest in the "larger dimension of life," a subject that could be addressed adequately in the university only by theology.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, he believed that the "integrity of the university, the conservation of its universality, its refusal to accommodate itself to mere expediency," might finally depend upon "courageous and prophetic church leaders who could insist on freedom for the university in the pursuit of truth."<sup>30</sup> But there is no evidence that Williams's views were credible outside the divinity school.

Apart from the questions being raised about systematic or dogmatic theology as a subject in the modern research university, questions were also being raised about the place of the divinity school in the university. In the same lectures at Yale, Hutchins argued that the divinity school, succumbing to the pressures of "vocationalism," had become "a feeble imitation" of all the other professional schools.<sup>31</sup> Because Hutchins thought that the university should be clearly separate from all vocational and utilitarian education, he doubted whether such a divinity school really belonged in the university.<sup>32</sup> Abraham Flexner, author of the famed "Flexner Report" on medical education, had also decried the presence of divinity schools in the modern university. Because of their commitment to presuppositions not capable of scientific verification and their inevitable denominational biases, said Flexner, they were an anomaly in a university dedicated to disinterested, objective research.<sup>33</sup>

Ironically, while both theology as a discipline and the divinity schools were under attack in the universities, support for the teaching of *religion*, even in state universities, was becoming very strong. In 1927, Herbert Searles of the University of Iowa argued that any university that aspires to interpret and understand the highest and best of culture in the past and present, must make a place for the study of religion in its curriculum.<sup>34</sup> His view was fairly typical among the leaders of state universities through the 1940s.<sup>35</sup>

Since the end of World War II there has been a significant expansion of the number of religious studies programs in both state and private universities. Support for these programs remains strong. Though there is little agreement about what constitutes religious studies, that does not seem to be a serious problem for their survival or the establishment of new programs. As recently as October 1991, Cornell, a state land-grant college that has never before had a religious studies department announced that it was establishing a religion department in response to the growing interests of students in the major ethical and value issues of the times.<sup>36</sup> To be sure, the position of religion faculty in universities, particularly state universities, is sometimes precarious, but that is usually related to student enrollment and the vacillating budget pressures on university ad-

ministrators.<sup>37</sup> In sum, the future of faculty devoted to the *academic study of religion* seems to be relatively secure in American universities, both public and private.

It is important to note, however, that almost all of the faculties of religion in state universities and a majority of those in private universities are careful to distinguish what they do from theological studies. In most cases this has meant that religious studies are primarily concerned with the historical, sociological, and psychological studies of religion. Systematic theology, let alone such things as religious education, pastoral counseling, and homiletics, are absent from almost all undergraduate religious studies curricula. Even graduate programs in religious studies at private universities are increasingly being organized as the study of the history of religions in contrast to the old graduate Christian theological studies programs that have long existed at the major university divinity schools. Within the last few decades, developments at Yale, Harvard, and Chicago indicate that the line between the faculty of the divinity school and the graduate faculty in religion is being drawn more sharply even though those faculty members in historical and biblical studies usually cross the line rather easily. They would probably remain in the university even if the divinity school did not. Those faculty members whose subject matter is more directly related to the faith and practice of the churches are at home in the university only so long as the divinity school remains a vital professional school of the university.

Is the university the proper home for a theological school whose primary mission is the education of leaders for religious institutions?

There are two aspects to this question. First, given the growing secularity, even of church-related universities, why should these universities support professional schools dedicated to the education of religious leaders, indeed, in most cases, institutions whose primary function is the education of leaders for Protestant religious institutions? Second, in light of the fact that the initial emphasis for the separation of theological education from the university came from the churches, another aspect of the question is why the continued existence of the university divinity schools is in the interest of the

churches while there are a number of excellent freestanding church-related theological schools in the United States.<sup>38</sup>

The presence of a divinity school in the university is important to the university in its effort to achieve its own goal of serving the common good. Education for the sake of the common good has been the most widely affirmed aim of the modern American university from the 19th century to today.<sup>39</sup> Thomas Jefferson at Virginia, Daniel Coit Gilman at Johns Hopkins, Andrew Dickson White at Cornell, Charles William Eliot of Harvard, Woodrow Wilson of Princeton, and James B. Angell of Michigan, all influential leaders in the conceptualization of the modern American university, clearly believed that a major purpose of the universities was to serve the common good by educating persons committed to public service to lead the major institutions of the society. By this they meant that the university should educate competent leaders sensitive to the value implications of professional choices of all kinds and who were capable of guiding the society in making just decisions about urgent moral, social, and political issues. This remains one of the most clearly articulated aims of the universities today. Because the Protestant churches are still major social institutions, the divinity school can make a significant contribution to the effort of the university to achieve its own aims by enhancing the quality of leadership in these religious institutions.

It is important to note that this variation of the arguments by Kant and Schleiermacher does not imply that *only* a university with a divinity school can achieve its aim of serving the common good. What is intended here is to make the case that a divinity school faculty can and does make an important contribution to the life and purpose of its university, and that it is, therefore, not only appropriate but desirable that there be university divinity schools for the good of the universities themselves.

The argument for the presence of the divinity school in the university is related to the fact that there is a need for a particular kind of church leadership. The university's aim of educating leaders for the common good can be served only if the institutions receiving those leaders will actually be served well.

The education of leaders in university divinity schools is important to the churches. Kant's warning about the dangers of fanaticism and divisive sectarianism were prophetic. Our world is the scene of dangerous self-righteous separatism among religious groups bent on uprooting contrary religious beliefs and purifying humanity by imposing beliefs on others by force.

This is, in some respects, quite puzzling, and is clearly out of step with developments in other major social institutions. The most creative leaders in business already have concluded that a global vision is the only one that will enable them to be competitive in the economy of the future. They understand that given the distribution of natural resources and the interdependence of world markets, anything short of such a vision will, in the end, be destructive to all of our dreams of well-being.

In striking contrast to these developments, there are ominous signs that the supporting constituency for a global religious vision among Christian groups in the United States is diminishing. There has been a sharp decline in the influence and size of the traditionally ecumenical denominations. All of the ecumenical Christian institutions in America are in trouble, and the major ecumenical denominations are torn from within by strident sectarian groups. As a result, the focus in the various councils and boards of theological education in the several ecumenical denominations has shifted from ecumenical cooperation and planning to matters of institutional survival. That sort of concern usually results in the growth of narrowly defined denominationalism that insists that candidates for ministry be educated in institutional settings that support particular doctrines and instill denominational loyalty. This clearly is already happening. In this situation, it is important for the churches and for theological education generally that some of their leaders be educated in strongly ecumenical settings. Leaders who are educated ecumenically can help the churches to overcome their divisiveness and assist faithful religious communities with the kind of spiritual reflection that will yield a more global religious vision of peace and justice in the world, one that reaches beyond the confines of our own religious traditions and reaches out with respect to other religious traditions in the quest for a fuller understanding of the one God, creator of the universe.

The university divinity schools can and do provide settings for precisely this sort of global reflection. Again, the force of the argument is not that the university divinity schools are the *only* locations for theological education of this sort. It is rather the more modest argument that they are less subject to ecclesiastical pressures and do continue to offer theological education with an ecumenical global vision. They are, therefore, important for the future of ecumenical churches and for leadership of major social institutions as well, making a genuine contribution to the common good of the whole society.

The status of the divinity school faculty as university faculty is, therefore, grounded not in their membership in some other faculty as Schleiermacher had argued that it must be. They are university faculty because they are members of the faculty of the divinity school, a school that is important for the university in the pursuit of its aims.

**E**ven if it is conceded that the divinity school as a location for the education of ministers belongs in the university alongside other professional schools, there remains the other question raised in the discussions at Berlin and also by the critics of theological studies within the American university: does theological thinking have anything to offer to the intellectual life of a modern secular research university? Even if the theological faculty are at home in the institutional setting of the divinity school, are they really full citizens of the university?

As we have noted, William Adams Brown won a concession from Robert Hutchins in the 1930s that theology of a certain kind belonged in the university. According to Brown, dogmatic theology had no place in a research university, but a genuinely ecumenical theology, not wedded to any set of dogmas, not only had a legitimate place in the university but was important to its intellectual life. Later, George H. Williams argued that theology was important to the life of the university because it represented the university's legitimate interest in the "larger questions of life." More recent commentators such as Richard Niebuhr, Gordon Kaufmann, Schubert Ogden, and Edward Farley have emphasized the role of critical theology in the life of the university.

Kaufmann makes the interesting argument that theology provides in the university a discipline devoted to the criticism of belief, not just Christian beliefs, but any “faith commitment” that represents the fundamental ordering belief systems of groups of persons. He, therefore, envisions a faculty of theology explicitly devoted to faith criticism that would be composed of representatives from a variety of faiths, themselves believers, but who function as internal critics of their own belief systems. Their critical capacity would be enhanced by continuing dialogue with other theological critics representing belief systems from other religions and secular faith communities. Kaufmann argues that a faculty of theology of this sort would be unique in the university and represent a necessary intellectual enterprise present nowhere else in the institution.<sup>40</sup> Ogden, focusing more on the role of the Christian theologian in the university, also views theology as a critical discipline because the study of theology must conform in every way to the scholarly canons of the modern university. He, like Kaufmann, notes that since the Enlightenment, the role of the scholar has been transformed from the one who masters and transfers a received tradition of truth to the one who discovers the truth by careful investigation, criticism, and rational argument. Thus, a university-based theology cannot be circumscribed by any official formulation of dogma, nor can it be subject to the limitations of ecclesiastical interests. In the context of the university, the theological professor is free to learn, free to teach, and free to publish whatever his critical research leads him to say. The only requirement is that her or his theological formulations, like the formulations of other citizens of the university, must be subject to critical appraisal and the rational criteria for validation or invalidation. In so doing, the Christian theologian makes a contribution to the intellectual life of the university by advancing criticism of a body of literature that constitutes a major segment of the intellectual history of the West. It also subjects to criticism a global network of intellectual discourse that makes truth claims about the way in which our world reality is formed and transformed.

The theological work of the university scholar may still be of service to the church, but the service will be indirect. By this is meant

that the work of the university scholar does not assist the church directly by bearing witness to its faith. It serves the church by continually subjecting the truth claims of Christian witness to the scrutiny of historical and rational inquiry to determine whether or not the claims are true. It may or may not support particular claims, but its validation will surely sharpen and strengthen those claims found to meet the critical test of rational validation.<sup>41</sup>

In Niebuhr's case, it is the constant reference to God the absolute, the "one beyond the many," that constantly brings into question any claims to the possession of knowledge that is final and absolute by parties in the university, the state, or the church. But theology not only has the function of relativizing all knowledge; Niebuhr insists that it serves the university in a positive way as well. For one thing, the relativizing effect of radical theological thinking invites freedom for new voices and facilitates mutual correction and creative conflict. It can also be the basis for the university's resistance to domination by the church or the state. In addition, the radically *monotheistic* posture of theological discourse points beyond the disunity and fragmentation of life toward a shared loyalty to the good of the whole. In this sense, theological thinking at its best serves as a reminder to the parts of the university of their obligation for the good of the whole of knowledge as well as the university's obligation for the common good of the human community.<sup>42</sup>

Farley calls this two-sided contribution to the life of the university a "third critical principle," one that is as important to knowledge in its own way as the critical principles of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, he says, grasped the relativity of knowledge and the necessity for the university to be free from dogmatism. It also grasped the multidimensional aspect of things, the necessity for completing and correcting paradigms of knowing. It did not, however, understand fully the dialectical character of human striving, that all of our efforts at correction themselves are subject to corruption. Thinking grounded in the Christian mythos provides an understanding of the depth, reality, and persistence of human corruption in a way not comprehended by the other critical principles of the Enlightenment. Thus, radical theological thinking invites a kind of modesty about

truth claims that is important for the promotion of intellectual discourse across the entire university.

This is not the end of the matter, for the promise of redemption is also at the heart of the Christian mythos. Recognition of the corruptibility of knowledge is always set in the context of new possibilities of knowing. This undergirds a positive commitment to the human quest for truth while avoiding the temptation to see that quest as capable of perfecting knowledge. This, in turn, might create a tendency in university discourse to anticipate new paradigms of knowledge; theological thinking might provide a mirror of redemptive possibilities in the pursuit of knowledge that is scarcely present elsewhere in the fragmented life of the modern university.<sup>43</sup> This in itself would advance the pursuit of knowledge in the university.

The assumption behind all these arguments is that the primary base of the university theologian will be the divinity school, but a strong case can be made that even in universities without divinity schools, the presence of theological thinking is important in the context of departments of religious studies. As I have indicated earlier, Schleiermacher believed that “dogmatic theology” belonged in the university because any study of the history of religion that ignored both past and contemporary belief systems was simply not complete. A religion, after all, is a historical “determinate faith.” Therefore, the “scientific” study of religion must include dogmatic theology because one cannot comprehend historical faith apart from an examination of the study of historical and contemporary belief systems. In the context of the modern American university, one might argue that in addition to the history of religion, the sociology of religion, and so on, theological studies are a necessary part of religious studies because the nature of religion cannot be fully understood apart from some clear understanding of the religious belief systems that arise in response to religious experience and constitute the subject matter from which religious communities form their shared identity. In a pluralistic religious world, of course, this sort of study must include theological thinking in its broadest sense, namely the study of belief systems of a variety of the world’s great religions.

In sum, it is the integrity of university-based religious studies itself that requires the inclusion of theological studies in the university. Of course, any argument of this sort rests on the assumption that religious studies itself constitutes an appropriate and coherent field of inquiry in the modern university. The ghost of Fichte is ever present to remind us that it is conceivable that the history of religion properly belongs to history, the sociology of religion to sociology, the philosophy of religion to philosophy, and so on. Thus it could be conceded that the study of religion is important in the university without conceding the need for a separate department of religious studies.<sup>44</sup> That is not a matter I have argued here because at present the status of religious studies in both public and private universities seems secure.

Theological faculties are rightfully citizens of the university. Not only does the presence of a university divinity school assist the university in the pursuit of its aims, theological thinking makes a significant contribution to the intellectual life and discourse of the university. How effective that citizenship will be largely rests on the initiative of the faculty members themselves. What is required is that we gain clarity about the nature and purpose of our corporate work and that we do it well. There are encouraging signs that there is a high level of energy to do just that.<sup>45</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. Portions of this essay are taken from my essay entitled "The Marginalization of Theology in the University," in Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa, ed., *Religious Studies, Theological Studies and the University Divinity School* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 37f.
2. George H. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 190-191. See also John Baillie, *What Is Christian Civilization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), 22.
3. Friedrich Paulsen, *The German Universities and University Study* (London: Longmans, 1906), 14ff.
4. *Ibid.*, 42-48.
5. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, translated and with an introduction by Mary J. Gregor, (New York: Abaris Books, Inc., 1979). The material that follows is based on this treatise.

6. See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Deduzierter Plan Einer Zu Berlin Zu Errichtenden Hohern Lehranstalt," in Ernst Anrich, ed., *Die Idee der Deutschen Universität: Die fünf Grundschriften aus der Zeit ihrer Neubegründung durch klassischen Idealismus und romantischen Realismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), 125f., (published by Fichte in 1807). Fichte's argument is discussed briefly in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, translated by Francis McDonagh (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 373n.

7. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*, translated by William Farrar (Edinburgh: 1850; ATLA edition, 1963), 91ff. Published by Schleiermacher in 1808. For Schleiermacher's views on the university see *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense*, translated and annotated by Terrence N. Tice with Edwina Lawler (San Francisco: EMTtexts, 1991), published by Schleiermacher in 1808.

8. Pannenberg thinks that Schleiermacher wrote much of his work before Fichte published his essay in 1807. Pannenberg, op.cit., 373n.

9. There was strong opposition to the teaching of theology in the university in Germany throughout the 19th century. For a history of the debate about the "science" of theology, see Pannenberg, op.cit.

10. See Edward Farley, *Theologia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), Ch. 4.

11. George H. Williams, *The Harvard Divinity School*, op. cit., 7.

12. Sydney Alstrom, "The Middle Period," in Williams *The Harvard Divinity School*, op.cit., 117ff.

13. Ibid., 146 and Levering Reynolds, Jr., "The Later Years," in Williams *The Harvard Divinity School*, op.cit., 170ff.

14. For example, Oberlin College's teaching of religion underwent a very dramatic change during the latter part of the 19th century, and the change was a direct result of German influence. David Palmer, a student at Oberlin, has described the changes in an unpublished student paper written in 1989. I am grateful to him for sharing the paper with me.

15. Conrad Wright, "The Early Period," in Williams, *The Harvard Divinity School*, op. cit., 23; and Williams, *The Harvard Divinity School*, op.cit., 5ff. See also, William Adams Brown, *The Case for Theology in the University* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1938), 33f.

16. Bainton, op.cit., 79ff.

17. Robert M. Healy, *Jefferson on Religion and Public Education* (New Haven: Yale University, 1962), 217f.

18. Henry Tappan, *University Education* (New York: 1851), in Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, *American Higher Education: A Documentary History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), 506.

19. Ibid., 507.
20. Henry Tappan, "The University: Its Constitution and its Relations, Political and Religious," in Hofstadter and Smith, op.cit., 530.
21. Brubacher and Rudy, op.cit., 156.
22. See White's reflections on his days at Michigan in Hofstadter and Smith, op.cit., 545f.
23. For the complete story on Harper, see James P. Wind, *The Bible and the University: The Messianic Vision of William Rainey Harper* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).
24. See Thornton Meriam, "Religion in Higher Education Through the Past Twenty-five Years," in Amos Wilder, op.cit., 3-23.
25. See Conrad Cherry, "The Study of Religion and the Rise of the American University," an unpublished essay.
26. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven: Yale University, 1936), 94ff.
27. Reynolds, op.cit., 212ff.
28. Brown, op.cit., 51, 77, 83f.
29. Williams, *The Harvard Divinity School*, op.cit., 5-6.
30. Ibid., 246-47.
31. Hutchins, op.cit., 102.
32. Ibid., 43ff
33. Abraham Flexner, *Universities, American, English and German* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968 edition), 29. Originally published in 1930.
34. Herbert L. Searles, *The Study of Religion in State Universities* (University of Iowa Studies, Studies in Character, Volume 1/3, 15 October 1927), 10.
35. See Merrimon Cuniggim, *The College Seeks Religion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1947), 77f.
36. See the article in *The New York Times*, October, 5, 1991.
37. This statement rests on the preliminary report made available to me of a "probe study" of the locations for the teaching of religion in the United States led by Ray Hart in 1989 and 1990. Hart's study, done under the auspices of the AAR, SBL, ATS, and other organizations interested in the teaching of theology and religion, is not yet published.
38. At this point, I am not addressing the issue of graduate education in religion. This has become, in practice, the primary function of some divinity school faculties whose program in ministerial studies is quite small or at least quite insignificant alongside the emphasis on generalized and specialized graduate studies. In these cases I can see no reasons, other than

financial and historical ones, to maintain the institutional structure of a university divinity school. The faculty could simply become the graduate department of religion.

39. For a full discussion of the responsibility of the university for the common good, including the distinction between the external and internal common good of the university, see my essay, "The University and the Common Good," in David R. Griffin and Joseph C. Hough, Jr., eds, *Theology and the University* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 97ff.

40. Gordon Kaufmann, "Critical Theology as a University Discipline," Griffin and Hough, op.cit., 35ff.

41. Schubert M. Ogden, "Theology in the University: The Question of Integrity," in Griffin and Hough, op.cit., 67ff.

42. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology in the University," *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 93-99.

43. Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 17-28.

44. David Griffin has recently mounted a very convincing argument that even under the provisions of separation of church and state in the United States, there is neither a legal nor a conceptual reason why the study of theology should not be part of the life of public universities, either as part of a department of religious studies or as a separate offering. For example, under Griffin's argument, an entire department of theology, conceived in the way Gordon Kaufmann has suggested, would not only be possible but desirable. (See David Griffin, "Professing Theology in the State University," in Griffin and Hough, op.cit. 3ff.)

45. I refer to the growing number of publications appearing that are focusing on the nature of theological education as such. For a partial listing of the major works see, Clark Gilpin, "Basic Issues in Theological Education: A Selected Bibliography 1980-1988," *Theological Education*, 25.2, Spring 1989, 115f.

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